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SUBJECT: SPS NOMINATES NEMTSOV, SEARCHES ITS SOUL

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reason: 1.4 (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The Russian liberal-democratic party the Union of Right Forces (SPS) held its party conference in Moscow on December 17 to nominate a candidate for president. A general party soul-searching and consideration of campaign mistakes occupied almost half of the conference agenda. In accepting responsibility for the poor showing on December 2, Nikita Belykh, the head of the party, tendered his resignation although he was ultimately re-elected. The party faithful stressed the need for hard work to overcome the defeat and the creation of a broader party strategy before the next Duma elections. As expected, Boris Nemtsov was the party's nominee for president. End summary.

A Crowded Hall, A Full Agenda

¶2. (U) SPS held a general party conference on December 17 in Moscow in order to nominate its candidate for President. The conference hall in Ismailovo where the conference was held was crowded with more than 140 delegates, a large press contingent, and dozens of guests and dignitaries (including Vladimir Bukovskiy, Soviet-era dissident and possible presidential candidate).

¶3. (U) The stunning defeat in the December 2 elections, where the party won only 0.9 percent of the vote, prompted a long exercise in self-examination on December 17. Party leader Nikita Belykh began by accepting responsibility for the poor showing on December 2 and resigned his position. In a public act of penance, he enumerated his own errors, particularly in not being able to create a united democratic opposition with Yabloko and in not creating a strong, opposition oriented campaign early enough. He attributed the poor showing to lack of support for the regions from party headquarters in Moscow, a sentiment echoed by many of the other speakers. Late in the day the delegates nevertheless re-elected him to his post.

¶4. (U) Speakers from the regions and from the party's political committee then addressed the delegates to point out either their or the party's mistakes. The original agenda allowed only two hours for speakers and guests to discuss the condition of the party following the Duma elections. However, the demand for time grew so great that these discussions stretched into the afternoon consuming four hours of the ten hour agenda. The rest of the time was devoted to secret ballots for party committees, leadership positions

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and, of course, presidential nominations.

15. (C) The first conversations we had with delegates set the mood for the entire day. Even with the poor showing in the elections, the party was ready to move on. Many spoke of the moral victory the party had in leading a "clean" campaign. Some followed Belykh's lead in insisting the party should have become strongly oppositional earlier. A delegate from Amur Region put the party's problems bluntly: dorogi i duraki (roads and fools). The huge expanse of Russia makes unification of the regions difficult, a problem not sufficiently addressed by the party leadership. Further, he claimed that the fools in charge of the party did not make the right decisions on running the campaign.

16. (U) In his speech to the delegates, SPS financier and godfather Anatoliy Chubays summed up the problem succinctly: "We lost." He stressed that the situation was much worse than the loss in 2003 when the party received 3.9 percent of the vote (compared to 0.9 percent in December). He called on delegates to search for the underlying reason why the party lost, to address it "with gritted teeth," and to move forward. He encouraged the party to go slowly. He repeated a theme that ran throughout the conference in noting that the party needed to find a way to connect with voters.

17. (C) Delegates at the conference, both speakers and rank-and-file, conceded that the December election results had been a disaster. All accepted a level of responsibility for the results. Besides Belykh, other members of the political and campaign committees accepted blame for what happened. In a sort of eulogy, party members and sympathizers called the leadership to task for poor strategies from the start and for a serious disconnect with its like-minded electorate. Maria Gaidar, a young and popular member who headed the Moscow list, chided the leadership for not having a strong strategy throughout the campaign. She proposed a party conference in May to discuss the presidential election and decide how the party would develop in coming years.

18. (U) In speeches designed to electrify the base of the party, Belykh, Nemtsov, Chubays, Bukovskiy and others reminded the delegates of differences between their ideology and the Kremlin's. Belykh criticized at length the concept of "sovereign democracy." Nemtsov criticized as unconstitutional the idea of a "successor" to Putin. Chubays reminded delegates that in the 1990s the party led the way in economic and political reforms. Bukovskiy questioned the very idea that Putin or his ideas provided stability and greatness to the country.

19. (U) Other candidates, particularly from the regions, addressed the serious lack of grassroots campaigning. Our interlocutor from Amur Region claimed that the SPS campaign failed for this very reason. He said that SPS needed to address issues important to the people in a way that United Russia does through its use of administrative resources. Even in the face of such opposition, he felt that SPS could garner strong support from that part of the electorate not satisfied with Putin's regime. Gaidar estimated that 15 percent of the Russian electorate shared the ideas and views of SPS. Others made lower estimates, but all agreed that the party had a solid base that needed to be tapped.

110. (C) Some delegates from the regions noted with bitterness that the Moscow party leadership had left the campaign in the regions to the regional parties. The regions felt overwhelmed and unable to cope with the financial, logistical, and at times judicial burden the campaign required. The party leadership acknowledged this problem and in fact placed a large number of regional members on the party's new political committee.

¶11. (U) As expected, the party nominated Boris Nemtsov for President. Notwithstanding the few "no" votes, delegates considered his nomination a foregone conclusion. In order to address criticisms that the liberal-democratic camp is fragmented, the party political committee gave Nemtsov the authority to negotiate with other like-minded candidates to put forward a single nominee from the right. The field of candidates from this camp currently includes Nemtsov, Bukovskiy and Kasyanov. The conference left the details of the negotiations to Nemtsov.

¶12. (U) In a somewhat unexpected move Maria Gaidar opposed an SPS presidential candidate. As she explained, the party will need to work hard in the coming years to regain its strength after the stinging results in early December, and resources expended on a quixotic presidential campaign would better go to regional grassroots party work. She told us that there remains a strong electoral base for SPS in Russia, but it must be developed. She reiterated Chubays's comments that the party has considerable work ahead and must not rush.

Comment

¶13. (C) It was clear from the start that Nemtsov would be nominated for president and Belykh would remain. Although there were changes in party committee membership, the party came out of the convention much as it entered it. Yet, the party is not the same that began the campaign back in September. The delegates' calls for more grassroots work appears to have been heard by the leadership. If SPS can build on the evident enthusiasm and work more cooperatively with like-minded partners, its performance may improve, but with the most recent Levada poll showing only six percent of the population identifying with liberal valued, the road ahead, in any event, will be rocky.

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